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ABSTRACT

This speech addresses school improvement issues from three perspectives. First, six shared assumptions from the recent studies and reports on the quality of American schooling are presented: (1) that the educational system must be immediately improved; (2) that quality and equity are inseparable; (3) that education is inextricably linked to larger social issues; (4) that the state, local, and federal government have important roles; (5) that schools, the private sector, and parents must work together; and (6) that control of the educational system should be decentralized. Following this, common recommendations are listed pertaining to curriculum, teachers, and management of schools. Next, views are presented on the positive influence that schools have had since 1950, including the increase in use of advanced placement tests, the increase in percentage graduating and going on to college, and the corresponding decrease in dropout rate, as well as the increase in minimum competency requirements. Change strategies in the areas of overall school improvement and academic learning time are summarized, and finally, a series of open-ended questions are posed for deliberation during the workshop. (TE)

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SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: ISSUES AND ANSWERS

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I have been asked to address School Improvement: Issues and Answers, a pervasive and encompassing topic. The national visibility of education issues has been dramatic during the past year, with answers being proposed by legislators, federal and state governments, scholars, and educators at the local level. I am going to attempt to do three things in my remarks this morning. First, I will present the shared assumptions from the recent studies and reports on the quality of American schooling. Secondly, I will discuss the recommendations regarding school improvement that grow out of these statements or that are commonly recommended by researchers and/or practitioners. And finally, I will raise some questions that I hope will be part of your deliberations and thinking over the course of this two-day workshop.

Since the United States Department of Education published A Nation at Risk in April of 1983, elementary and secondary education has become a central topic of discussion for families, political aspirants, and federal, state, and local leaders. This attention is providing an opportunity for

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the educational community to examine the purposes, objectives, quality, and delivery of instruction and learning opportunities for students. We should view this attention as our chance to institute local and regional campaigns to improve the quality of, and perceptions about, schooling in the 1980s and beyond. The most central assumption is that the quality of American schooling needs improving. With the exception of the Boyer and Goodlad treatises, all of the blue ribbon panels begin with an overview of the national or international economic situation and deduce recommendations from this perspective. The usual conclusion is that things, meaning our international competitive edge, would not be so frightful if schools were better. I personally take exception with this point of view. Schools and our educational system are products of and are dependent upon our economic system, not the other way around. The accusatory stance taken by these panels belies the obvious; that somewhere along the way a number of erroneous business management decisions were made, involving retooling versus quick capital gains and, as a nation, we seriously depleted the natural resources. These things and the fact that we are no longer in an industrial age have set the stage for a loss of competitive advantage.

A recent synthesis, by the Education Commission of the States, summarizes 10 recent studies, and lists the following shared assumptions:

1. All agree that the quality of our current educational system must be <u>immediately</u> improved.

2. All agree that quality and equity are inseparable issues.

3. All assume that education is inextricably linked with the larger social issues (the economy, politics), and that without education America's future is bleak.

4. All agree that the state, local, and federal government have important roles to play. There is wide divergence, however, in the extent of the roles and the responsibilities for funding.

5. Most believe that the schools, the private sector, and parents must work together to provide and produce the most meaningful school experiences.

6. Most agree that the most efficient system is based on a decentralized model. Control would be vested within individual communities; priorities would be set by the communities, using differing approaches to renewal. Of those reports mentioning decentralized control, all feel that this autonomy would guarantee creativity, innovation, and imaginative solutions to problems.

The following recommendations are commonly suggested:

Curriculum

There should be a common core curriculum.

Extraneous, nonessential courses should be dropped.

Facility with language is mentioned in most reports.

Computers and technology should be stressed.

Students should have some sort of career guidance.

Teachers

The schools need better teachers.

Incentives must be created to entice better people into classrooms.

Once there, it is necessary for the systems to provide rewards to people who remain in the classroom and the field of teaching.

Teacher preservice training needs improving.

Standards for certification should be improved.

Management and Organization of the Schools

School level decisions should be jointly arrived at, made by administration and classroom staff.

Partnerships between the schools, the private sector, and parents are essential and need strengthening.

Guidance services need expansion.

More homework needs to be assigned and graded.

Fair codes of conduct and discipline need to be developed by all schools--K-12.

Social promotions should be eliminated.

The school day and/or year might need to be extended.

The primacy of the principal in schools needs to be insured.

The time devoted to the acquisition of basic skills needs to be increased.

Before discussing some of the research findings of the "effective schools" researchers, I would like to share some of my thoughts on the positive influences schooling has had since 1950--pluses which all of the reports have glossed over.

- In 1970, only 58,000 students took advanced placement tests; in 1981, 134,000 high school students took these tests. They measure knowledge, not aptitude.
- The first year the headstart youngsters were in high school was 1983. Only 19 percent were in slow learner classes, compared to 39 percent of control group children.
- In 1955, approximately 55 percent of white students and 30 percent of black students graduated from high school. In 1982, 85 percent of white and 75 percent of black students graduated.
- In 1947, only 28 percent of fifth graders went on to finish high school. By 1980, this number had increased to almost 85 percent.
- About 85 percent of U. S. youth, aged 15-19, are full-time students. This compares to 51 percent in France and Germany, 44 percent in Great Britian, and 40 percent in Italy.
- The educational attainment of the age cohort born 75 years ago was 8.7 years of schooling. Thirty percent graduated from high school; 13 percent completed one year of college.

The cohort born in 1950, now 34 years of age, attained an average of 12.9 years of schooling. Eighty-five percent graduated from high school, 47 percent completed one or more years of college, and 26 percent are college graduates.

- Dropout rates are declining nationally, according to a recent NCES report. In 1970, of persons aged 14-34, 17 percent were reported as dropouts; by 1980 this percentage had decreased to 13 percent.

- In a National Commission on Excellence commissioned study, 69 percent of sampled districts stated they had implemented activities to increase attendance during the 1979-82 period, and 51 percent stated they planned to either augment or implement programs by 1984-85.

- And finally, a fast response survey, requested of 571 districts by the National Commission on Excellence, indicated that between 1979-1982, 57 percent implemented policies and procedures to increase core subject requirements; 49 percent increased or established minimum competency high school graduation requirements; 26 percent increased the amount of homework required of students; and 49 percent established or increased courses to improve students' study skills/nabits.

The list is endless, and I am sure that for each failing discussed in the national reports, we could find pluses. For each of our pluses, a critic could find minuses.

What is important, however, is that within the last 35 years a larger percentage of our nation's children are in school. Of these children, a larger percentage are graduating and going on to institutions of higher learning. The great national experiment of providing an equal educational opportunity to all children is closer to a reality.

The seminal Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka Decision, in 1954, defined equal opportunity as equal access to facilities. We have gone beyond that point, and we are now talking about equal educational opportunity as the chance to, and expectation that, all students are capable of learning the criterion-referenced material.

The single, most talked about report on the effects of schools during the 1960's was James Coleman's Equality of Education Opportunity. This report was widely misinterpreted to mean that schools don't make a difference, and there is really nothing that schools can do to overcome the cultural and economic disadvantages that children bring to school with them. In reality, Coleman and his fellow researchers attempted to link the various, static resources available to each school with the variations in achievement of the school's students. By static resources I mean things like teachers' levels of certification and years of experience; federal, state, or local dollars available; number of books in libraries; racial and social background of the student population; etc. The report concluded that student outcomes were more closely associated with family background and status than with the resources available at the school.

A major failing of the Coleman report was that it paid very little attention to the instructional practices, management practices, reward systems, and other activities and influences present within the school. Later research, culminating in the body of research we currently call "effective schools," began to focus on how schools were organized and how that organization maximized the resources, both fiscal and personnel, to focus on student achievement. The effective schools approach is an attempt to examine the manner in which teachers, counselors, and administrators coordinate their efforts to assist the classroom teacher to maximize the amount of instructional time available, and how efficaciously that teacher then motivates and reinforces the learning process.

The research also took a quantum leap forward when it began observing variations within specific settings. Were there major differences in

student achievement within the same school? Were there differences witnin the same districts? The answers to these questions were a resounding yes-- and the reasons for the yes explain the elements of effectiveness.

In a recent staff development session in New Jersey, Michael Cohen discussed another dimension of the current research. He believes that the early research overlooked the fact that most of the variation in student achievement occurs within schools. The formative period assumed that all resources were applied to all students equally. This ignored the fact that within schools students were assigned to specific learning tracks (college preparatory, general, etc.) and the teachers, textbooks, field trips, social groups, and clubs were different for each track. Outcomes, then, were predictably different.

The current body of research began focusing on more dynamic school processes, on what a teacher actually does within the classroom. Was he or she well prepared and organized? Did the lesson flow, or did it require constant interruptions and backtracking to cover important material? Was the classroom environment conducive to learning?

Cohen had some interesting views on the most current classroom management literature (people like Glasser, Hunter, Brophy, Good, et al.). Effective teachers, the research posits, can be characterized by the organization, planning, and instructional strategies they use. The real difference between good, poor, and awful classroom managers is not so much indicated by how they respond to disruptive behavior but by the instructional practices they employ. To a large extent, these begin before the first class meeting and continue throughout the academic year.

It is their consistent skill at managing and planning student time which reduces the opportunity for disruption; it is not their strong response after the disruption has occurred. This means that lessons are well organized and thoroughly prepared--with all materials available before the class meets.

It is also interesting to observe that the majority of current research, as summarized by Barak Rosenshine in a 1982 presentation, suggests--especially for younger students and those categorized as "slow learners"--that highly structured, direct and well-supervised learning experiences are the most effective. This is an interesting observation, given the emphasis placed on discovery learning and individualized, learning station practices. It seems to indicate that teachers need to consistently give instruction, explanations, myriad examples and ask for active student participation. This is not an easy task. But it falls into the definition of effective, achievement-directed classroom management. A high rate of student success (80 percent or better for new material and, hopefully, 90 percent or better on review) provides the positive reinforcement needed to foster achievement.

When combined, prior preparation, effective control and management techniques, strong reward systems, and good instructional practices have enormous effect on a concept called academic learning time (ALT). This phenomenon has three major components:

1. Allocated time per subject area. There are documented cases in which students within the same school building receive four to six times the amount of instructional time in a specific subject area as their peers.

2. Engagement time refers to the proportion of the academic period in which a student is either working on academic tasks or attentive to the teacher. Relinquishing time to

loudspeaker messages, discussing housekeeping chores, or handling disruptive behavior distracts from engagement time.

3. Success rate should be in the 80 to 90 percent range I discussed earlier. This is a surprising conclusion (Fisher, 1980), given the body of psychological literature which suggests motivation is increased when assignments are moderately difficult. On second thought, however, in the classroom a higher success rate would imply that the teacher is spending sufficient time on task, reinforcing and repeating with examples to insure a firm grasp of the basic concepts before moving onto another topic--somewhat different from the abstract motivational research of applied psychology.

The sense of efficacy and positive expectations for student achievement is especially important in classrooms with a large number of low achieving youngsters. There is voluminous research to document that teachers differentiate between low and high achieving students. Such treatment might include fewer opportunities to respond to questions asked of the class, more frequent criticism, and less praise.

An informal study of school-related reasons for students' dropping out was conducted by Bruce Wells at North High School in Worcester, Massachusetts. Wells concluded that poor attendance in the upper elementary and middle school years is strongly associated with dropping out later on. In an anonymous survey of several hundred high school dropouts, 60 percent said teachers putting them down, calling them "stupid," or "dummy," implied that they could not learn and, therefore, they concluded: "Why stay in school?"

Dr. Leslie Hart, in Human Brain and Human Learning posits that when we are anxious or fearful, our higher thinking skills are blocked by the more primitive parts of the brain which tell us to duck or run for cover. "The child freezes, seems unable to think, stabs wildly at

possible answers, breaks into tears, vomits, or acts up, perhaps to the point of violence."

Effective teaching practices are just one element of the "school excellence" program we are here for today. I would like to summarize, by suggesting a series of change strategies that the research focuses upon.

School Improvement Programs

1. Treat the school building as the unit of change, instead of the entire district, or individual administrators or teachers. A district may launch this process, but the focus of change strategies must be individual schools with central administrator support and involvement.

2. The identification of the problems to be addressed and the subsequent solutions to the problems are jointly agreed upon and developed by the administration and the staff.

3. The plan of attack (action plan) is developed to include who is responsible for what and when. It includes a strong evaluation plan, which periodically gauges progress and recycles to an earlier step if results are not acceptable.

4. All of the above occur using available dollars to the extent possible. Plans are developed, implemented, and evaluated using existing resources.

There are a plethora of school-based programs either being planned or currently operating, but the statistical base for these is still miniscule. We need another few years of evaluation and operation to begin a hard analysis of effectiveness along the axis of lasting change, ease of change, and effectiveness benchmarked along the criteria of increased student achievement (once again measured on standardized test scores).

Academic Learning Time

1. Increased homework--as long as it is intricately interwoven with class work, and regularly corrected and commented on by the instructor.

2. Depending on the interrelationships present in the district, teachers, counselors, department chairpersons, etc. can work together to actually "desk audit" the amount of time classroom teachers are spending on specific content areas. These, then, can be aligned and evaluation instruments developed, and shepherded through the arduous process of school board approval, which assess specific, agreed upon, learning objectives.

   This is not meant to suggest a litmus test for classroom teachers and their conformance with districtwide directives, but can be an extremely useful tool to bring the curriculum into alignment and develop achievement tests which measure material and subjects actually taught.

3. We can, by using joint planning and decision-making processes, agree upon schoolwide, and even districtwide, academic goals and objectives. This would afford more time, across an entire school, to those subjects agreed upon as more fundamental or important.

4. Finally, by developing and agreeing upon a code of student conduct and uniformly enforcing it, we can decrease disruptive behavior and, therefore, increase the actual amount of time available for instruction. Codes of conduct are important tools in the hands of personnel whose management skills are honed. Honing can be accomplished through in-service programs, presenting the newest and most effective approaches to teaching, and using classroom management skills. There is no mystery here, and no failing in not knowing (almost from birth) good management skills. Too long has the profession relied upon intuition to replace practices missing from the syllabi of undergraduate and graduate education courses. This is one viable area for the over-maligned in-service sessions.

Numerous mechanisms are available to more completely focus the curriculum around a content core and develop a testing program aligned with this core. The easiest, of course, are districtwide testing programs. In states like New Jersey with statewide competency testing mandates, the program must be further aligned with the state's mandates. Since achievement testing programs should measure students' performance benchmarked against instructional offerings, curriculum alignment should accompany the development of a districtwide or schoolwide testing program. Building level planning, involving all members of the staff, can serve to

bring instructional objectives, content, and goals into proper perspective. Decisions on how to accomplish these objectives should be joint, to be most meaningful.

Richard Elmore's "Backward Mapping" strategy has substantial relevance here, especially since it focuses on the attitudinal and behavioral dimensions necessary to bring about the institutional and instructional changes we have discussed earlier.

The bottom line in all this seems to me to be the following questions:

> Do we, as educators, want to help produce an informed, educated, and participating citizenry?
>
> Do we, as educators, want to help produce people who, intelligently, can contribute to the well-being and continued growth of the country?
>
> Do we, as educators, want to help produce people who value learning enough to continue their education after leaving our classrooms?
>
> Do we, as educators, want to assist in the development of people who can exist in the new and demanding information age?

If the answers to these questions are yes, then as a profession, we should begin to seriously examine any body of research which allows us to adapt quickly and completely.

The spotlight is on us...<u>this is our year</u>! By applying the ever increasing and more relevant research base with the practical, everyday experiences of the people who know children and schools the best (those who spend the majority of their working hours within the confines of the classroom and school building), we can bask in the spotlight and revel in Spinoza's realization that "all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare."